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Intimate places: playgrounds for self-exploration

David Habets¹, Julian Kiverstein², Erik Rietveld³, and Damiaan Denys⁴

Abstract

Our essay starts from our first-person experience of visiting El Eco Experimental Museum in Mexico City. Over the course of our visit, El Eco became, what we will call an ‘intimate place’ in which we were able to explore personal thoughts, memories, and feelings. We go on to compare El Eco to *Black Water* (2021), a site-specific art installation by RAAAF. We draw on Donald Winnicott’s work on play to show how intimate places like the El Eco museum have commonalities with the therapeutic setting of psychotherapy. They are places that enable people to freely associate by enabling a visitor to be in a state of relaxation, and by affording a rich array of disruptive possibilities for self-exploration. We understand such *intimate places* as playgrounds that can (temporarily) disrupt rigid patterns of resistance or avoidance, enabling a person to confront difficult emotions and experiences that might otherwise go unnoticed.

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1. Visiting El Eco

We start this essay by recounting a visit to El Eco Experimental Museum in Mexico City built by sculptor and architect Matthias Goeritz in 1952. Before continuing look at figures 1, 2 and 3 at the end of the article.⁵

When El Eco was opened on September 7th of 1953, Matthias Goeritz read his *Emotional Architecture Manifesto* to the invited guests. It is a short piece of text that reads like a conceptual description of the museum, outlining Goeritz’s

aspirations for the place. The first lines read:

The new El Eco Experimental Museum in Mexico City begins its activities, that is, its experiments, with the architectural work of its own building. This work was understood as an example of an architecture whose main function is emotion. Art in general, and so naturally also architecture, is a reflection of the spiritual state of man in his time.⁶

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⁵On the 3rd of January 2023 I had the opportunity to visit the museum in company of director Paola Santoscoy, my partner Eva Posas Rasgado and our son Biguzaa Habets Posas. There was no exhibition installed after the holiday break. In the evening after the visit, I described my encounter with this ‘inverted sculpture’, a museum that attempts to be a ‘gesamtkunstwerk’ with the works of art it puts on display.

⁶Manifesto de Arquitectura emocional, 1953 | Museo Experimental El Eco. Accessed June 12, 2024. <https://eleco.unam.mx/manifiesto-de-la-arquitectura-emocional-1953/>.

The name El Eco (“The Echo” in English) was given to underline its function as a place for self-reflection. We believe that such places can contribute significantly to mental well-being in cities as overwhelming as Ciudad de Mexico (CDMX), as in other urban environments.⁷ More specifically, we propose that the contemporary art museum⁸ can serve as a place that can offer space to playfully disrupt intimate thoughts, feelings and memories that might be obstructive to one’s mental well-being in the long-term. Contemplative places, like the museum afford possibilities for gaining reflective insights that in everyday life might remain obscure to us or that we might otherwise avoid.

We can think of the kind of *aesthetic experience* we have in a museum, or in an art installation, in terms of the psychodynamic concept of *free association*. Freud invited his patients to “speak” whatever comes into their heads, even if they think it unimportant or irrelevant or nonsensical ... or embarrassing or distressing⁹. We aim for a better understanding of the commonalities between freely associating memories, feelings, and thoughts when engaging with an artwork, and free association as it is performed in a therapeutic setting under the guidance of an analyst.

Many of us might be familiar with expe-

riences of having spontaneous thoughts, feelings and memories when observing a work of art, sometimes overwhelming and frightening. Think, for example, of how the abstract brush strokes of Rothko can remind a visitor in grief of a lost loved one. We suggest that free association in aesthetic experience can play an important role in affect regulation¹⁰. This is not to say that these are easy, or even pleasant experiences. On the contrary, meaningful, and disruptive engagements with art, we suggest, are often painful and confronting.

Places that enable us to be open to reflect upon intimate and significant episodes in our life, we will call *intimate places*. We will revisit Donald Winnicott’s work on play to show how intimate places share with the therapeutic setting of psychotherapy that they are places that enable people to freely associate, enabling a person to confront difficult emotions and experiences that might otherwise go unnoticed. Drawing upon Winnicott¹¹, we will understand such intimate places as *playgrounds*. In his book *Playing and Reality*, Winnicott develops a broad understanding of ‘play’, in which he included free association, fantasizing, day-dreaming, and mind-wandering (and more), far outside of the psychotherapeutic setting.¹² All play he considered to be closely related to

⁷Habets, Kiverstein, Rietveld, and Denys, “Trusted urban places”, 1.

⁸The are many kinds of museal settings. Following Carol Duncan in her book *Civilizing Rituals* (2017) we can discern two main types of exhibitions. The first, prioritizes the educational value of historically situating the artefacts on display (this can be art, anthropological or naturalistic objects) and a second type that is primarily concerned with the experience of the visitor. El Eco, and in more general contemporary art museums fall into the latter category and are the focus of this essay.

⁹Freud, “Freud’s psycho-analytic procedure,” 251, and Lear, *Wisdom Won From Illness*, 12.

¹⁰See Gross (1999, 2014) for an account of emotion regulation. Gross makes a useful distinction between what he calls “antecedent focused strategies” that are initiated while the emotional episode is developing, and “response focused strategies” that act upon emotions that have already formed. He describes how specific strategies for emotion regulation include the selective alteration or modification of the environment, our focus in what follows. Gross (2014) distinguishes emotion regulation from affect regulation, which he takes to be broader in scope including not only short-lived emotion episodes but also persisting moods and feeling states. We use the broader category of affect regulation in what follows.

¹¹See Winnicott, “The location of cultural experience,” and Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*.

¹²In Winnicott’s writing there is an overlap between his use of words like ‘illusion’, ‘magic’, ‘fantasy’ ‘omnipotence’, and ‘creativity’. While intriguing we do not have space to explore the connections between play and imagination and hope to return to this in future work.

the work a client does with their psychoanalyst.

We will argue that the contemporary art museum, like the therapeutic setting, is a highly specialized playground that offers “a service of communication with oneself and others”¹³. In places like *El Eco*, we can come to make use of the environment to explore personal thoughts, feelings and memories. We suggest that contemporary art museums can be experienced as intimate places when they invite an individual:

- (a) to enter a state of relaxation
- (b) to engage with disruptive possibilities for self-exploration.

Following Winnicott, by relaxation we do not only mean a state of physical rest. We mean states where one is liable to become frightened, irrational, anxious, aroused, excited while still feeling secure to return to a resting state of mind. In our account such relaxation is afforded by places that are typically shared by a wider community of people. Think, for instance, of calming public places in the city where you might live. It is not hard to name archetypes that afford such a state of mind. Contemplative places like libraries, churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, and public museums, like *El Eco*, as well of natural archetypes like gardens, parks, walking paths crossing the countryside, rivers, the seaside, caves, and mountain tops. This is off course not meant as an exhaustive list of contemplative public places but as examples that draw attention to how relaxation is situated in an individual’s living environment. We don’t mean to claim that everyone will have such experiences in the contemporary art museum. Our aim is rather to highlight that such experiences are plausible in the contemplative setting of an art space.

2. Winnicott on transitional phenomena

We take as our starting point Winnicott’s account of the way children experience their relation to “objects” at around the age of 6 to 12 months old. In these months, a key moment in a child’s emotional development takes place as the infant moves from “object-relating” to what Winnicott called “object-usage”.¹⁴ At birth the child is completely dependent on her caretakers to actively respond to her needs. In this first period of life an infant is in the stage of object-relating. A child’s physical involvement in the world has meaning through projection (this has been described as cathexis), as something of the child is found in the ‘object’, but the ‘object’ is not yet separated from the child. In this case ‘objects’ are understood broadly to include people, as well as more ephemeral objects, like birdsong. Over time the child’s dependency on her caretakers gradually lessens in accordance with the infant’s ability to tolerate frustrations. Slowly, with the help of their surroundings, the child learns to make use of objects understood as being separated from themselves and as part of a shared reality with others. Winnicott refers to this as “object-usage” by which he means interactive experiences, or patterns of dyadic interaction that are learnt and acquired in the sensory, motor, and affective development of a child.¹⁵

Winnicott’s insight is that there is a type of experience in childhood located in between ‘object-relating’ and ‘object-usage’ which he described as the *transitional object* or *transitional phenomena*. Transitional phenomena represent an early stage of the *use* of imagination in

¹³Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 53; emphasis in original.

¹⁴See Winnicott, “Transitional objects and transitional phenomena,” “The capacity to be alone,” and *Playing and Reality*.

¹⁵Beebe and Lachmann, “Co-constructing inner and relational processes: self- and mutual regulation in infant research and adult treatment,” and Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: a view from psychoanalysis and developmental psychology*.

play¹⁶. For Winnicott it is in encounters with transitional phenomena that “*fantasy begins for the individual*”.¹⁷ He suggested that this in-between, the process of placing of the world outside oneself, continues into adult life. Transitional phenomena enable a child to accept and enjoy “*the perception of the object as an external phenomenon, not as a projective entity*”.¹⁸

Importantly the transitional object is “never under magical control”¹⁹ but depends in part on the existence, the qualities, and behaviour of the external objects. An iconic example is a child’s stuffed animal. When it gets dirty the parents leave it unwashed knowing that soap could introduce a break in the continuity of the child’s experience. Parents recognize and safeguard the ‘illusion’ and sense of security the object gives the child. When washed the stuffed animal may lose its familiar smell that offers relief as a defense against anxiety. The infant weaves the ‘other-than-me’ object into a personal pattern that become vitally important, for example at bedtime, to the child. These patterns of interacting with transitional phenomena continue in adult life by becoming integrated into the processes of affect regulation.

Winnicott located transitional objects in what he called *the potential space* “between the subjective object and the objectively perceived”.²⁰ This idea of the potential space directly influenced how he thought about the suitable therapeutic environment for his patients. He came to think of the therapeutic setting as a “highly specialized playground”:

The general principle seems to me to be valid that *psychotherapy is done in the overlap of the two play areas, that of the patient and that of the therapist*. If the therapist cannot play, then he is not suitable for the work. If the patient cannot play, then something needs to be done to enable the patient become able to play, after which psychotherapy may begin. The reason why playing is essential is that it is in playing the patient is being creative.²¹

For play (in the wide sense of use) to take place Winnicott formulate the following three conditions:

- (a) Relaxation in conditions of trust based on experience.
- (b) Creative, physical, and mental activity manifested in play.
- (c) The summation of these experiences forming the basis for a sense of self.²²

In the relaxation that belongs to trust and to acceptance (be it analytic, psychotherapeutic, social work, art, architectural, etc.) there is “room for the idea of unrelated thought sequences which the analyst will do well to accept as such, not assuming the existence of a significant threat”.²³ In terms of free association this means that the child patient, on the floor among the toys, or the adult seated in a chair in the analyst’s office, must be allowed to communicate a succession of ideas, thoughts, impulses, feelings, memories that might be unlinked. What we will take from the idea of

¹⁶Cf. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 15.

¹⁷Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 121; emphasis in original.

¹⁸Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 120.

¹⁹Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 13.

²⁰Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 130.

²¹Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 72; emphasis in original.

²²Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 75. We focus on the first two conditions for our analysis of intimate places since the third would require a more extensive discussion of how Winnicott understood selfhood, a topic that is beyond the scope of our essay.

²³Cf. Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint*.

potential space is that the ‘where’ of free association, outside of the therapeutic setting, depends as well on the provision of relaxation, trust and acceptance.

3. Trust, relaxation, and disruption

Following Winnicott, the key idea we develop in this essay is that art spaces such as *El Eco*, can function as transitional phenomena. Obviously not every interaction with an artwork or visit to a museum plays such a role for a person. Yet there are moments, many of us will recognize, that we feel most intimate, most absorbed, and most touched by a work of art, even if we cannot put into words how exactly. Intimate places afford an individual the opportunity to explore thoughts, feelings and memories that in everyday life may reside in the background of their experience of the world, or that they may avoid confronting. The most intimate are often negative feelings, memories, and thoughts.

We suggest that the state of relaxation, as described above, is a precondition for this type of self-exploration. Such a state of relaxation quite literally offers space to feel, to think and remember. The resting state of mind is characterized by an openness to aspects of the environment that invite the person to remember, or imagine, to let their minds wander. Such feelings, thoughts, and memories in themselves don’t have to be experienced as calming, as we will see they can be disruptive, frightening, and overwhelming. Yet by instilling a feeling of relaxation, a person can attend to invitations to explore her or his inner personal life. By ‘inner’, we mean memories, thoughts and feelings that make up part of one’s experience that are difficult to communicate, or for others to share. We do not think of the person’s inner mental life as something that happens in

a private inner mental realm that separates the mind from their surrounding world. On the contrary, it is the place of the museum that can invite such inner exploration. Moreover, memory and imagination are unfolding relations between an individual with the places, people, and things in her or his life. The experience of the present is laced through with feelings and contents of past experiences shaping one’s perception of possibilities that lie ahead. In this way our most intimate and significant memories, thoughts and feelings form, in part and often unreflectively, our orientation to the world. These invitations to explore one’s inner mental life are directly related to one’s life trajectory, to the memories and abilities a person accumulated. Such invitations can be relevant only to an individual person with specific past experiences and history, like for example when Proust smelled the madeleine pastry he wrote about²⁴, or related to shared experiences of a specific community such as one’s family.

One possible way to make sense of how an art experience can be *disruptive* is to think of how such experiences can breakdown everyday defense mechanisms that shield an individual from anxiety, enabling them to maintain psychological stability.²⁵ Defense mechanisms operate automatically and often outside of conscious awareness. The person may for instance repress difficult thoughts and memories or refuse to accept a painful event in their lives. Such defense mechanisms serve to maintain psychological stability by shielding the individual from negative thoughts, feelings, or memories. Defense mechanisms can also become the cause of ‘abnormal’ or pathological ways of relating to the world. Consider the following unpleasant example, a person goes running in a park every morning and is brutally harassed one day. They might start avoiding the park and possibly stop running in the morn-

²⁴Poulet, *Proustian Space*.

²⁵Freud, “The neuro-psychoses of defence,” and Freud, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*.

ings. Such a painful experience can (in part) disturb the person's feeling of safety in public places. The park that was previously a site of numerous positive memories, can suddenly become a threatening place. After the traumatic event the possibility of being harassed might not only drive the person to avoid running, but may more generally narrow the person's openness to possibilities offered by their living environment.

In intimate places, such attitudes of avoidance can (temporarily) be broken down. An important aspect of such a disruptive experience is the unfamiliar, out-of-the-ordinary experiences that museums and art installation can offer a person. We propose that aesthetic experience can disrupt defense mechanisms. Freed from the shielding of the defense mechanism, a person can thereby potentially be led to reflective insights. An intimate place can confront them with difficult feelings they might otherwise resist. In the remainder of our essay, we will describe how a process of disruption might unfold, using the first-person experiences in El Eco as an illustrative example.

4. Disruption in intimate places

How can an experience of an intimate place be disruptive? We will argue that such places enable us to enter a state of relaxation in which we freely associate. We make such an argument

in part based on our own personal experience of visiting El Eco in CDMX. El Eco set in motion a stream of free associations. Drawing on the work of Winnicott (as discussed in section 2) we suggest a precondition for free associating is the instillment of trust. In contrast to the therapeutic setting where the analysand converses with the analyst, the visitor of a museum "converses" with themselves in the context of their engagement with the arts space. The flow of associations an artwork can evoke has commonalities with the dialogue that is constructed in the therapeutic setting, and can be triggered by unfamiliar, anxious, uncanny, or distressing invitations of an artwork. The idea of aesthetic experience as an evocation of an associative flow, or as Kant called it the "free play of the imagination", was already well recognized by 18th & 19th century thinkers like Shaftesbury, Schopenhauer, Fechner, and James. They noted a characteristic "disinterestedness" and "psychological distance" from the art 'object as an object' by the aesthetic beholder,²⁶ an attitude away from practical and use-oriented attitude of everyday life.²⁷

Take *The Scream* by Edvard Munch. Think of how the anxious figure at the center of its swirling world can make you feel. It can evoke an anxiety that puts at stake the confidence we have in our everyday engagements with our surroundings. We argue for the importance of the situation in which one encounters the agonized face painted with oil paint, tempera,

²⁶See for a review Cupchik, "The evolution of the psychical distance as an aesthetic concept", 156–160, and Brincker, "The aesthetic stance: on the conditions & consequences of becoming a beholder", 4–5.

²⁷We thank the anonymous reviewer for reminding us to stress the long tradition in thinking of aesthetic experiences in terms of flows of associations. This noted it should be added that our account of association is divergent from its use by Hume or Kant. We follow William James's critique in his discussion of association, where he points towards associations to be understood as "*Association, so far as the word stands for an effect, is between THINGS THOUGHT OF—it is THINGS, not ideas, which are associated in the mind.*" We argue that thinking of association in terms of 'between things' aligns with the relationality in *transitional phenomena*, between real-objects and fantasies, daydreams, and creative thoughts in Winnicott's potential space. We follow James in that the flows of consciousness cannot be broken up into distinct "ideas". Thoughts, feelings, and memories arise and fade and overlap, sometimes attitudes persist in the background, even if some are transient and difficult to name. For James the association of *ideas* presents a mistake because conscious states are never discrete and can never be revived in exactly the same way.

and pastel. It is the place that enables the visitor to open to negative feelings, moods, or emotions, that might be repressed or denied in everyday engagement with the living environment, while remaining open to feelings of amazement, awe, or happiness. For example, a mood like anxiety can still be disrupted by positive moods, emotions, and feelings. The place supports the person to maintain a playful orientation towards the situation. In the words of Donald Winnicott, the museum setting can bring the visitor “from a state of not being able to play into a state of being able to play”.²⁸

In museums we suggest that the sequence of spaces with distinct qualities of light, sound and materiality, is of great importance to invite the visitor to relax and to come into a state where she or he can freely associate. In architecture the structuring of spatial sequences is commonly described in terms of scenography and atmosphere.²⁹ We will take a walk through El Eco to make tangible these ideas. We will analyze the relation between individual and surrounds both in terms of architectural characteristics, as in terms of the psychodynamic concepts of relaxation, free association, and self-reflection. In this way we will use three archetypal spatial elements: the portal, the playground and the enclosure, as build metaphors to describe where free association takes place.

4.1. The Portal

Before continuing look at figures 4 and 5. The entryway brings a visitor into the moment, attuning them to the affects the place has on their body, leading them into a place that is differentiated from day-to-day time and space outside. This is done by the spatial dimensions, light sound, and smell that builds up a sequence of atmospheres.³⁰ For example, by creating a crossing from light to dark, from noise to silence, or for example from full to empty. Art historian Carol Duncan borrows the term “liminality” from the anthropological writing of Belgian folklorist Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner to indicate a mode of consciousness outside of or “betwixt-and-between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states and processes of getting and spending;” she frames the museum as a “liminal space”.³¹ An archetype of a passage into a liminal space is a darkened portal leading towards the light, like the long converging hallway of El Eco. Such a passing is commonly found in temples, Greco-Roman churches and other ceremonial and ritualized forms of architecture³² and creates an atmosphere which is often described as contemplative.³³ In the architectural manifesto *Emotional Architecture*,³⁴ written as a companion piece when El Eco was built, Matthias Goeritz makes explicit references to such contemplative architectures as a model for museums as places for self-reflection.

In intimate places, there is always a demarcation from the ordinary, everyday outside world.

²⁸ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 51.

²⁹ See Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: architecture and the senses*, Zumthor, *Atmospheres: architectural environments, surrounding objects*, Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*.

³⁰ Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, 114, Havil, *Urban Literacy: reading and writing*, 58.

³¹ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: inside public art museums*, 11.

³² See Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: inside public art museums* and Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Existence, Space & Architecture*.

³³ See Christian Norberg-Schulz, *The Concept of Dwelling: on the way to figurative architecture*, and Zumthor, *Atmospheres: architectural environments, surrounding objects*.

³⁴ Manifiesto de Arquitectura emocional, 1953 | Museo Experimental El Eco. Accessed June 12, 2024. <https://eleco.unam.mx/manifiesto-de-la-arquitectura-emocional-1953/>.

A sequence of spaces prepares the visitor for their encounter with the works of art. When moving from the city into the museum, people become more silent, they tread more carefully and in a slower pace through the scene. The material arrangement of the museum creates an atmosphere in which people adopt a shared ‘code of conduct’³⁵, or ‘decorum’.³⁶ Architectural qualities, such as the resonant acoustics of the seemingly empty halls are an invitation to lower one’s voice and remain quiet. People pick up and adopt the carefulness of others around them. Such shared group behavior ensures and safeguards possibilities for reflection and self-exploration.

4.2. The Playground

Before continuing look at figures 6 and 7. In this state of relaxation, the visitor enters the museum’s playground. In the exhibition halls works of art (artifacts, performances, videos etc.) are brought into light, into silence, staged and framed in such a way as to grab one’s attention. Unlike in everyday situations, one does not have an immediate and unreflective grasp of how to act on artworks³⁷. Artworks are open and ambiguous in their meaning precisely because they invite the contemplative and thoughtful activity of attentive evaluation. Think of how one can calmly sit in front of the abstract brush strokes of Rothko in the galleries of Tate Modern in London, while exploring the colors, layers of texture and scale of the works in relation to ourselves. Rothko’s paintings are immersive experiences full of tragedy,

terror, violence and yet optimism. The painter himself called this: “... *I have imprisoned the most utter violence in every square inch of their surface*”. We suggest that the contemplation and relaxation afforded by the art gallery contributes to a person openness to the oceanic violence³⁸ embedded in and experienced as a flow of painful and confronting feelings, thoughts and memories evoked by the paintings. We suggest that in intimate places, like in El Eco, when we perceive aesthetically, we are enabled to guide the spontaneous associations that an art works solicits, entangling negative and positive evocations.

Let us look more closely at the self-report as an illustration of this idea. In an empty El Eco, without any show on display light itself became a spectacle that grasped attention (see caption 7).³⁹ It initiated a cascade of thoughts, memories, and feelings:

I remembered looking out the bathroom window that morning photographing the specular colors of the sunrise. I remembered feeling anxious seeing the colored strip hanging above the horizon. I remembered how beautiful those colors were. I remembered reading in Daniel Hernandez’s book *Delirious Mexico* about the blanket of smog he saw when he drove with a bus into the suburban hills in the North. How can one live in a city that violates one’s bodies continuously? I followed the gradient of light from dark blue in the shadows to the warm light and stepped

³⁵Goffman, *Behavior in public places*.

³⁶Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: inside public art museums*, 16.

³⁷Following and extending on the analysis of artworks by Heidegger in “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1950), Alva Noë (2015) has called artworks *strange tools*. Art is *strange*, out-of-the-ordinary, distinct from everyday functional objects. Through works of art, we can reflect on the ways that our lives are structured and ordered. It can potentially reorganize us and our world.

³⁸We thank the anonymous reviewer for this beautiful depiction that resonates with our own experience of Rothko’s paintings.

³⁹Remember that El Eco was meant to be a ‘inverted sculpture’, like art installations, and to form a ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’ with the exhibitions on display (Goeritz, 1958).

slowly towards the light in the corner. I remembered the smog alarm that my partner received on her cellphone from the city governance, urging us not to drive unless absolutely necessary. Could I live in a city that violates my family's health? We have been living here for a couple of weeks and I hardly think of breathing anymore. I could feel myself breathing more slowly in that moment. How can I deny atmospheric pollution so seemingly effortlessly? The longer I looked the more colors I could discern.

This self-report shows an interplay between aspects of the environment and a procession of spontaneous associations with the colors and associated to each other. 'The light on the wall' was a starting point, and intermediary, in a cascade of personal associations. Not simply an 'object of contemplation'. The same light might call on totally different thoughts, memories, and feelings in another, or probably none at all. This illustrates how an intimate place demarcates a potential space in-between the shared reality and the personal.

In the process of free association, strong feelings and often painful memories of a person can become dynamically coupled to aspects of the situated artworks, leading to further exploration of the work of art and the associated thoughts, feelings, or memories. For example, the memory of breathing heavily and feelings of anxiety intermingle with appreciation of the beautiful gradient of colours. In a relatively short period of time associations are gathered in a single place, so their interrelations become inspectable and potentially reflected upon. By attending to specific aspects of an artwork or

an art space, like the gradient of colours, an individual can, for a short period of time, experiences a certain feeling of direction in their flow of associations. Through this process of free association, an individual can become aware of feelings, memories, and thoughts that in everyday life might remain resisted, denied, or suppressed. The associations are spontaneous and can often surprise and overwhelm a person. Such an experience of surprise can be exciting, enjoyable, as well frightening. This may be part of the reason why art works allure us to play with our 'inner realities' and may allude to the anxiety that in such experience we might confront ourselves with something that can threatens our psychological stability, our stable ways of being in the world. Possibly even to the verge of a mental breakdown. As Marie-Henri Beyle, better known as Stendhal, described in his book *Naples and Florence: A Journey from Milan to Reggio*. Who found himself, fainting, in confusion, having rapid heartbeats and even hallucinating during his visit to Florence in 1817.⁴⁰ Possibly Stendhal found himself, unable to guide the feelings, memories and thoughts by himself securely in his encounter with the overwhelming wealth of renaissance art.

Here we find an important difference between free association in the therapeutic setting and the museum setting. In the psychotherapeutic setting, the guidance of *vocalized associations* and the *dialogue* depends on the ability of both the client and the therapist.⁴¹ The person relies on the expertise of the therapist who is focused on how to facilitate the free flow of consciousness in someone else.⁴² Therapeutic change is based on a moment-to-moment process and can happen in special moments of empathic correspondence between patient and

⁴⁰We thank the anonymous reviewer for suggesting referring to the Stendhal syndrome as an example of the possibility of negative aesthetic experiences leading that might lead to disturbing a person's psychological stability, possibly even a mental breakdown.

⁴¹See Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, and Lear, *Wisdom Won From Illness: Essays in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*.

⁴²*Wisdom Won From Illness*, 13.

therapist.⁴³ In aesthetic perception, an individual depends on their own abilities to make use of the unfamiliar, anxious, uncanny, distressful invitations offered by artworks for guidance.

Both the therapeutic and the museum setting have in common the dependency on a reliable environment and the acceptance of others to freely associate, to think, feel, remember, imagine whatever comes up. The playground of a museum can thus be thought of as a socially (and collectively) accepted place in the urban fabric to explore personal, emotional, and possibly profoundly disruptive associative sequences of thought.⁴⁴

4.3. Enclosure

Before continuing look at figures 8 and 9. The last movement is outwards, before when end up back onto the city streets, into what we will call *the enclosure*. Archetypes like the atrium, the courtyard, the patio, the cloister, and the enclosure are often used in architectural arrangements giving form to such a transitional movement.⁴⁵ In El Eco, the inner courtyard of the museum is the place where the city infringes on one's experience again. The heat of the Mexican sun, the view of the sky that the monolith in the corner guides the eye towards, the sounds of the city, the filtered light of the trees. It is also the place to comfortably converse with another, without disturbing the absorption of other visitors. The patio reconnects the visitor to their wider surroundings. Here the world creeps back onto our place of intimacy, while still sheltered by its enclosing walls.

We can think of the spatial sequence we are

moving through as a metaphor of moving from an inner-reality (of projection and defense mechanism) through transitional-reality (the potential space) back into the shared-reality with others. The transition back into the world offers us the possibility to confront ourselves with defense mechanisms of resistance or avoidance.

For example, the 'light on the wall' in the self-report above triggered a flow of associations, wherein most disruptive "the colors of the sunrise that morning" brought to the fore the anxious feeling of breathing heavily. The recollection of anxiety felt towards an inescapable polluted atmosphere co-occurred with the thought of breathing the same air all day long without feeling any anxiety or doubt. The cascade of associations led to the realization of anxiety, and a previous denial of a harmful reality. In this example, the mental conflict remains unresolved. The disruptive experience only leads to further questioning like: "where do I want to live with my family?"

In general, aesthetic experiences are not directed towards the resolution of conflict but can lead us to question *what we ordinarily take-for-granted* in our lives. Alva Noë writes: "art aims not for satisfaction but for confrontation, intervention, and subversion".⁴⁶ It offers us a place to re-enact and become aware of ways we suffer and (pre-reflectively) cope with suffering. In an intimate place we can play with these negative feelings in a secure environment. 'Play' does not suggest only positive encounters. Within aesthetic experience we can become anxious for real, or overwhelmed, scared, frightened, be in rage, or become angry. Yet, the *optimal zone for play* between

⁴³Stern, "The process of therapeutic change involving implicit knowledge: Some implications of developmental observations for adult psychotherapy," and Stern, *The present moment: in psychotherapy and everyday life*.

⁴⁴Cf. Milner, *On not being able to paint*.

⁴⁵Often a museum café, a place to sit and talk announces itself at this moment in the sequence. In this intermediary between liminal and the everyday, where in conversation with others the path to self-understanding can be continued, in an attempt to share, weigh and reflect upon the *intimacy* of an experience in such interactions.

⁴⁶Noë, *Strange Tools: art and human nature*, 15.

over-stimulation and under-arousal⁴⁷ that intimate places can afford allows for pleasurable feelings of astonishment, estrangement, beauty, or ecstasy to coincide with negative affect, like denial, loss, failure, shame, or disappointment in relatively short frames of time. This potentially can open a person's relation to the world by transforming the affective tone of associated feelings, memories, or thoughts. In El Eco the beauty of the colours of the morning glory intertwines anxious feelings related to where to settle as a family.

Free association can lead to an awareness of tensions between the inner and shared reality. In psychotherapy, free association is aimed at the unearthing of mental conflicts that are not reflected upon in everyday life. The technique is to promote self-understanding and possibly a better integration of different parts of ourselves.⁴⁸ Aesthetic perception might similarly offer awareness of tensions within habits that, in the short-term, help to maintain psychological stability by shielding the person from uncomfortable thoughts, feelings, or memories that in the long-term may lead to maladaptive patterns of coping and suffering. In this way the art museum can be thought of as a transitional phenomenon. By offering space for self-reflection, we can think of intimate places as disruptive sites in our living environment.

5. Conclusion

Our essay started from our first-person experience of visiting *El Eco* Experimental Museum in Mexico City. We have described how, over the course of our visit, El Eco became, what we call an *intimate place* in which we were able to explore personal thoughts, memories, and feel-

ings. By describing details and the dynamics of these experience, we have outlined a process of disruption that art experiences can afford.

We have drawn on insights of Donald Winnicott's from his work on play to show how places like El Eco share commonalities with the therapeutic setting of psychotherapy. Following Winnicott we can understand the process of *free association* as a feedback loop that moves a person from an 'inner-reality' through a potential space (transitional-reality) towards a new understanding of oneself in relation to the 'shared-reality' with others. We have outlined how intimate places more generally, and the contemporary art museum and art installations more specifically, enable people to freely associate. Free association is ordinarily seen as taking place exclusively in therapeutic contexts. This is a mistake, as we have illustrated with the art museum, there are many more places that can also provide playgrounds to explore *oneself*.

In our self-reports of moving through El Eco, we have analyzed the museum in terms of the architectural spaces: the portal, the playground, and the enclosure. We have offered an interpretation of these spaces using the concepts of relaxation, free association, and self-reflection. Following this path, we have illustrated how one can come to experience and guide cascades of associations in relation to the works of art that can lead to an awareness of defence mechanisms. Such a self-understanding does not resolve or answer mental conflicts but can be experienced as contributing to an openness to explore new ways of relating to difficult emotions and challenging experiences we would otherwise resist, deny or avoid.

⁴⁷Cf. Stern, *Forms of vitality: exploring dynamic experience in psychology, the arts, psychotherapy, and development*.

⁴⁸Lear, *Wisdom Won From Illness*, 12.



Figure 1: *Entrance into El Eco. In bright white handwriting El Eco presents itself on the street. The door is black and falls in line with the wall when closed. The street and the corridor are the same level. The corridor feels like an inward extension of the sidewalk. The hallway is an enclosing and dark space that narrows towards the end. It feels as if the walls are closing in on me, when walking down the corridor. Limiting my freedom of movement but directing me towards the warm light in the back. The dark hallway conveys memories of other places, of alleyways at night, the stairs to the cellar, or a lonely hotel corridor. Frightening places of my past. Yet this darkness doesn't feel like an anxious darkness. Not even to my one-year-old son who came along and crawls through the darkness, in and out of the frame of the camera. It is a darkness that frames the warmth lighting up at the back.*



Figure 2: *Main exhibition hall of El Eco. The hallway opens onto a void of light. It feels like relief to bathe in the warmth reflecting of the wooden floor and the ceramic tiles outside on the patio. I stand in silence in this bright container. Cut-off from the sounds of the street at the other end of the corridor. Its lightness and quietness give of a calming presence. My mind fills the space with possible sculptures, paintings on display, dancers, and other performers. Possibly all from my memory. My attention returns to the color of the light. I am drawn to the light floating suggestively near the ceiling on the high white walls. I can see the gradient of reds and yellows moving towards the blue shadows. They remind me of the sunsets above CDMX I've been enjoying that month, and the dreadful thought of the atmospheric pollution causing such spectacles of light.*



Figure 3: *View onto the patio of El Eco. Onwards is outwards onto the patio. The way out is through a large cross shaped windowpane. It immediately brings back memories of Roman Christian Chapels I have visited throughout my life with my parents. Stepping through the cross I feel the heat of the sun radiating of the ceramic floor. The city hush rushes back in. The large yellow monolith in the corner of the courtyard draws my attention to the sky, to the eternal blue framed by the trees. I feel the expanse of air above me yet feel sheltered by the walls surrounding the patio. Breathing the hot air, thoughts on the pollution come back to me. The place gives me a sense of standing still in the midst of the metropolitan malestream. A door hidden in the corner behind the yellow monolith leads back into the corridor and onto the street.*



Figure 4: *Hallway into El Eco. The dark hallway acts as a portal, a rite of passage into El Eco. Its darkness alerts me, it frightens and makes me more aware of my steps, the light and color at the end of the hallway. The darkness frames a warm glow of light on the wall on the back. It is not a terrifying darkness, even my one-year-old son when he feels he is being watched, bravely crawls from the dark into the light on his own.*

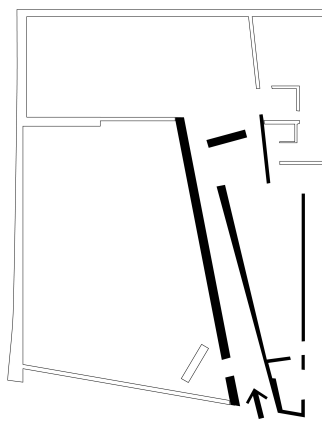


Figure 5:
*Plan drawing
indicating the
portal into El
Eco from
James Sullivan
Street.*



Figure 6: *Light reflected on El Eco's walls. A ghostly reflection floats in the gradient of light in the right-hand corner. An almost balmy gesture. The warm glow reminded me of that day's sunrise. It looked like a glowing drape hung from the sky. My breath was heavy ever since arriving in CDMX. It made me think of how one can deny or accept such violation to the body continuously, and almost entirely unreflectively. How can atmospheric pollution become accepted almost as a natural phenomenon? Unlike the refraction of the light by the minute particles of pollution in the atmosphere, the light on the wall only resembled the pollution of the skies. Space to breath, decompression.*

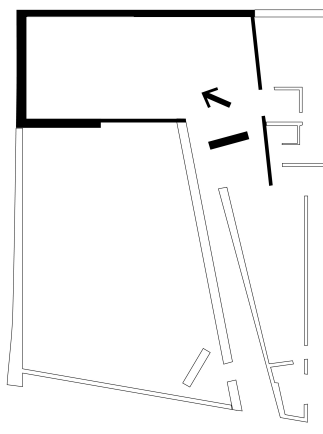


Figure 7:
*Plan drawing
indicating of
the main
exhibition
space, the
playground of
El Eco.*



Figure 8: *Monolith in the patio of El Eco. Walking to the corner behind the monolith the two walls stretch out on two sides of the courtyard. In the shadow side of the monolith, it is much cooler, under the respirating leaves. I hear the birds in the tree above. The light is filtered at this end of the patio. In sharp contrast with the overwhelming heat and delineation of the other side. My body relaxes after breathing heavy under the sun. Thoughts of the polluted air come back to me. I imagine all the people out on the sidewalks and in cars passing at that moment in the side, rushing through this heavy air, in acceptance. Or denial. My thoughts go up with the monolith towards the sky. Now pale blue, profoundly different from the hazy colors of the sun rises that frighten me.*

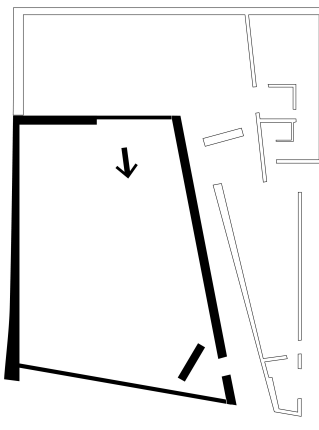


Figure 9:
*Plan drawing
indicating of
the patio, the
enclosure of El
Eco.*

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